

Cheering Academic Success

Contributed by Greg Fuderer
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"It was disappointing," Larry Simonsen said. "I'd heard too many disparaging comments about students in East LA and South Central. There was an underlying feeling of low expectations in education circles." Fortunately, neither Simonsen nor the students at Hollenbeck Middle School shared those feelings.

A few years after Hollenbeck's designation as a math and science magnet school in 1998, Simonsen, a teacher and Co-Coordinator of the school's Science Fair along with Fred Quintrell, talks proudly about the academic success he has seen and helped nurture.

"You must get higher test scores" doesn't motivate students," Simonsen said. "You have to give them something they can own. They look to be validated."

As he briefed the judges before the competition, Simonsen suggested that they would be viewed as more than academic advisors. "When people from industry and academics take time to review their work and talk to them about it, that validates what they've done," he told them. "You have rock star status."

Several U.S. Army Corps of Engineers members earned rock star status when they judged some of the 274 projects at the school's science fair for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. They were among the three dozen or so who reviewed projects with titles like Do people remember black and white better than color? and How does the pH of the LA River affect the diversity of species found at a particular site? and Why are native amphibian species not establishing populations at urban storm water ponds?

The judges came away impressed.

"I enjoyed each of the students I interviewed," said Rick Andre, a hydraulics engineer for the Corps in Los Angeles, who was judging for a second year. "You could see that they were surprised and pleased with how much they had learned." The students Andre interviewed weren't the only ones who had learned.

A few years ago, Simonsen attended a science fair and was concerned about the lack of Black and Mexican American students participating. So he organized a field trip for some of his students. "Do you think you can do that?" he asked as they toured the project displays. He could not have known how correct their "Yeah!" would turn out to be.

In the intervening years, Simonsen saw one, then three, then seven and most recently 11 students receive awards at the LA County Science Fair. Many of them advanced to state competition.

That success has helped establish a culture of expecting more from projects going to state competition, Simonsen said. "The bar just keeps getting higher, that's due to you being here, helping us," he told the judges.

Another of those helping contribute to Hollenbeck's success was Vicki Castro, who was principal at school until January, 2006. "She really opened the door for us," Simonsen said. "She helped secure funding for equipment and allowed time for teachers to do research with the students."

Ruben Duenas, who was instrumental in establishing Hollenbeck as a magnet school, spoke of some of the difficulties the students face in completing their projects. "We held fund-raisers, and teachers donated their own money to buy equipment," he said. He spoke about another equally if not more important type of contribution. "At high school, students all have mentors, and the more mentorship, the better quality the work," he said, highlighting the benefits of the judges' involvement. Duenas stressed the importance of teaching young students to apply the scientific method. "What better way to learn it than to spend a year doing it?" he asked.

Simonsen also emphasized the learning process when he briefed the judges: "Don't think of the projects as finished, but as a starting point," he said.

Regardless of the perceived state of completion, Ron Lockman was pleased. "I'm impressed with the thoroughness of the projects," said the Corps biologist. "At first glance I thought, 'These could have been a little better.' Then I thought of some of the graphs I've seen in EAs and thought, 'These look pretty good.'"

Lockman said it was satisfying to see scientific methods applied to local problems like trash on the street and bacteria in water. "Kids want to know about the environments they play in," he said. "These are social issues."

Throughout the morning, student volunteers went to classrooms to tell budding scientists that some "rock stars" were waiting in the gym to talk to them about their projects. Some seemed shy or unsure when first confronted with a panel of scientific experts. By the end of the interviews, however, most students appeared relaxed and confident. They seemed to have taken Duenas's words to heart: "You are the expert on your project."

Simonsen related an incident where they were short on student volunteers. "I went to get a student one time, and the classmates were all cheering for their friend's academic success," he said. "That's something you don't see very often."

The judges in a sense demonstrated one aspect of Simonsen's comment on service, giving back to the community.

"What every teacher lives for is to have a student say 'I want to do this'," he said. "You will always find the time to help them."